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THE DISAPPEARANCE OF CHRISTIANITY FROM NORTH AFRICA

by

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In this article, Mr. Hofford, pastor of Covenant Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Burtonsville, Maryland, raises, and satisfactorily answers, a question of considerable importance not only for the church historian but for those involved in missions.

With this issue, the Reformed Bulletin of Missions suspends publication. The reason for this is, chiefly, the apparent unavailability of material of the quality and interest which the publishers consider essential for a project of this kind. If these circumstances should, at some time, be reversed, publication in the present or some other form may be resumed, and subscribers will be notified to that effect.

- The Editor

INTRODUCTION

Historical questions of popular interest are quite likely to have a great many equally popular answers which unfortunately obscure actual historical processes. The question of the fate of Christianity in North Africa suffers from such a popularizing influence. The question is frequently posed in such a way that one is given the impression that Islam wiped out a flourishing Christian church in North Africa when it swept across the continent in the seventh century. Of course, the answers given to the question in such a context do not always really bear on the problem of Christianity's disappearance from North Africa. It is the thesis of this paper that when the Muslims, fresh from their victory in Egypt, began their invasions of North Africa, a seriously weakened and non-indigenous Catholic Christianity was the religion of only a minority of the Roman and Byzantine colonials, most of whom fled the country when the country was given over to the Arabs.

As an aid toward the understanding and evaluation of the character and extent of Christianity in North Africa, we may conveniently divide into three sections the history of the Faith there from its beginning (the first record of a North African church dates from A.D. 180), until the Arab invasion in the late seventh century. The Roman Period extends from the beginning of Christianity in the first century until the Vandal invasion in 429. The second period encompasses Vandal domination from 429 until about 532 when Justinian reasserted Byzantine hegemony over North Africa. The Byzantine restoration lasted until the Muslim invasions beginning around 648.

I. THE ROMAN PERIOD

The geographic and social structure of North Africa is of primary importance for understanding the character and extent of Christianity during the Roman period. For our interests, it is significant to note that Roman civilization and Latin culture functioned primarily through the cities and towns along the North Africa coast.¹ Thus, the great mass of the Berber population living outside the more heavily populated coastal areas were not deeply touched by the Romanizing influence. The nomadic and semi-nomadic culture of these people was quite alien to the Roman way of life.² Naturally, the Berbers who lived closest to the coastal towns and cities were more thoroughly influenced than those who remained in the hinterland.³ Thus, the Romans, like the Phoenicians before them, failed to strike deep roots into the North African soil. One historian has put it rather romantically: "'The Phoenicians and the Romans have been swept away, but the Berbers have remained, like the palm trees and the desert sand.'"⁴ In addition to the

¹C. P. Groves, The Planting of Christianity in Africa (London: Lutterworth Press, 1948), I, 58.

²Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs (London: Macmillan & Co., 1937), p. 214.

³Carl H. Becker, "The Expansion of the Saracens. Africa and Europe", The Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. II: The Rise of the Saracens and the Foundation of the Western Empire, ed. H. H. Gwatkin, and J. P. Whitney (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1926), p. 365.

⁴Ibid.

Berbers and the Romans, a third social element must be noted. These are the Punic peoples, the rulers whom the Romans had conquered when they took over North Africa. Thus, Roman North Africa was composed of three layers: a thin Roman layer on top, a Punic layer beneath them, and a bottom layer composed of indigenous Berber tribes.⁵

As Christianity began to make progress in North Africa during the first three centuries, the Roman colonizers were the chief people to be brought into the church. At the time of Constantine, Christianity became firmly planted in the Latin-speaking elements of the cities in spite of persisting paganism. The Punic-speaking layer of society was influenced less by Christianity, and Berber adherents were probably few.⁶

Before leaving the Roman period, we must mention the Donatist schism which began in the fourth century and continued right up until the Muslim conquests in the seventh century. For our purposes, there is no need to discuss in detail the controversy that racked the North African church. It is sufficient to note that this was no minor church squabble: by the end of the Roman period the Donatists outnumbered the Catholics.⁷ Further, in its self-consuming and deleterious effect on North African Christianity, it not only exacted a heavy toll within the church itself, but, by usurping its energies for the conduct of this internal struggle, distracted the church from its evangelistic mission to the large pagan Berber population.

At the end of the Roman period, then, there were two brands of Christianity divided over three zones. First, most of the population in the Romanized towns were Christian, but the spirit of paganism was still alive among many, both communicants and catechumens. In the colonized countryside there was a distinct Christian influence, but pagan cults were still in active operation. Finally, in the uncolonized areas where Roman influence was slight, the population was still definitely pagan.⁸

II. THE VANDAL PERIOD

In 429, the teutonic Vandals invaded North Africa, and for an entire century controlled what was once a part of the Roman empire. The effect of this Vandal domination on the civilization of North Africa was vast, and it must not be underestimated in seeking an explanation for the disappearance of Christianity from North Africa. Specifically, the Arianism of the Vandal invaders left an indelible mark on North African Christianity. Professor Speel concisely summarizes the far reaching impact of that century of Vandal hegemony:

⁵Groves, I, 65.

⁶Kenneth S. Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol. I: The First Five Centuries (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1937), p. 171.

⁷Groves, I, 62.

⁸Ibid, p. 66.

...the Christianity of the Vandals not only superimposed itself upon the Catholicism of the North African cities and virtually replaced it, but it made great inroads among the Berbers of the countryside...⁹

Under the strong leadership of Gaiseric, the Vandals dealt vigorously with non-Arians, especially Catholics. Churches were confiscated, treasuries expropriated, and most of the Catholic clerics of the cities and towns shipped off to Italy.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the Vandals had gained the support of many Berbers. Under Huneric, Gaiseric's successor, Catholicism was practically exterminated from North Africa. Nearly 5,000 Catholics were exiled to the mountains, and many other Catholics, including bishops, presbyters, deacons, and other clergy, embraced Arianism.¹¹ These apostasies were probably motivated as much by political as by religious reasons.¹² Under the Vandal rulers which followed, conversions to Arianism increased in North Africa.¹³ Speel summarizes the results of Vandal rule as follows: "...the Arianism of the Vandals, during the century of Vandal rule, had done its work. The religious complexion of North Africa had changed from a predominately Catholic orientation to an overwhelmingly Arian orientation of the Vandal stamp."¹⁴

III. THE BYZANTINE PERIOD

In 532, Justinian regained control of North Africa from the Vandals, and there was a revival of Catholic Christianity when some Roman colonists journeyed to the area. Unfortunately, Justinian used Christianity for the extension of Imperial political power by encouraging all to become Catholic Christians who wanted his good will.¹⁵ This policy was successful at first, and it brought a number of Berber peoples into the church who had hitherto been untouched by Christianity.¹⁶ But the all too frequent political motivation for nominal assent to Christianity proved the gains of the Catholic faith during this period to have been ephemeral. The perfidy of the Byzantine authorities during this period also contributed toward the ineffectiveness of an already weakened Catholic Christianity.¹⁷ In addition, Catholic Christians in North Africa became alienated both from Constantinople and Rome, and North African bishops from 544 until the Muslim conquests were treated as inferior underlings by Constantinople and Rome.¹⁸

⁹C. J. Speel, "The Disappearance of Christianity from North Africa in the Wake of the Rise of Islam," Church History, XXIX (1960), p. 384.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 386.

¹¹Ibid., p. 388.

¹²Latourette, I, 196.

¹³Speel, pp. 388-89.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 390.

¹⁵Groves, I, 68.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Speel, p. 390.

¹⁸Ibid.

It should be noted that in spite of Justinian's restoration and the attempt to revive Catholic Christianity, the majority of the Berbers in the countryside remained Arian or pagan, or else turned to a revived and modified Donatism.¹⁹ The population of the cities also remained Arian and did not turn in any significant numbers to the Catholic fold.²⁰ The political fortunes of the Byzantine rulers fared no better than the religious ones, particularly in relation to the Berbers.²¹ Thus, when we come to the Muslim invasions of the seventh century, we find the political and religious condition of North Africa greatly weakened and confused. For our purposes, it is especially significant to note that Catholic Christianity was limited to only a small segment of the Romano-Byzantine population, and was sadly lacking in vitality because of the complicated political and religious situation.

CONCLUSION

In a paper of this scope, the story of the Muslim invasions during the seventh century cannot be recounted, but some highlights of that period must be mentioned in order to confirm our thesis that by the time Islam arrived in North Africa, Catholic Christianity was severely crippled in power and sharply limited in its influence. When Islam did sweep across the continent, most of the Latinized population fled the country, and the Berber and non-Berber Arians easily converted to Mohammed's religion not only because of the cultural, economic, political, and military advantages, but also because of the theological affinities which Islam bore, even in greater measure than Catholic Christianity, to Arianism.²² A few Christians managed to stay on, but by the eleventh century, there were only five bishops, and the few remaining Christians were divided among themselves.²³

Thus, the disappearance of Christianity from North Africa cannot, basically, be attributed to the power and influence of Islam. For all intents and purposes, a healthy Christian church was virtually non-existent, for the reasons set forth above, when the Muslims took over North Africa.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 391.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Becker, p. 365.

²²Speel, pp. 391-93.

²³Kenneth S. Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity, Vol. II: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1938), p. 304.

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